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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

3/31/77

CT007

March 31, 1977

PARTICIPANTS: Bishop Carlos T. Gattinoni, Argentine Evangelical  
Methodist Church  
Patricia Derian, D/HA  
Fernando Rondon, ARA/ECA  
Yvonne Thayer, Political Officer, Amembassy Buenos Aires

PLACE: US Embassy

DISTRIBUTION: Ambassador Hill

Bishop Gattinoni is the head of the Evangelical Methodist Church in Argentina and a member of the World Council of Churches. He first described the collapse of Isabel Peron's government in the midst of overwhelming economic and socio-political problems and the inevitable necessity of a takeover by the military forces by March 1976. Even longtime liberals, such as himself, he said, realized that the coup was necessary and that the country would have to go through a period of a conservative and firm re-ordering. The main problem now was that the military forces are divided on many issues and the hardline proponents are posing a constant challenge to the more moderate policies of President Videla. He characterized the Navy and the Air Force as the two hardline forces and the Army as the more moderate branch. If the military services could not find agreement, there is a serious danger of civil war. Gattinoni said he hoped that Videla's speech this evening would shed some light on the situation.

Due to these inter-service conflicts, the Videla government has not been able to fully control the security situation nor the problem of human rights abuses. A parallel, "para-military" force operating at large was responsible for most of the right-wing excesses. However, Gattinoni said he believes the government is now beginning to bring the situation under control. The number of cases of torture that come to his attention have diminished in recent months. Disappearances, though, have not. In fact, they seem to have increased in the last few weeks. This Gattinoni attributes to an effort by Videla opponents to embarrass the President and subject his government to further criticism from the Argentine population and abroad.

In answer to Ms. Derian's question about how violators of human rights can be brought under control, Gattinoni said that it presented a serious problem. Many of them are foreigners (for example, mercenaries brought in from Algeria by Lopez Rega during Isabel Peron's government) and presumably can be shipped out of Argentina. Argentine citizens who have been brutalized by a "lust for blood" will be a more difficult problem to resolve.

The population understands that it is not now ready for the liberal democratic form of government that it would like to have. The only two parties

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

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Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

☒ Release ☐ Excise ☐ Deny

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are the Peronists and the Radicals and neither are in any condition to govern the country. The Radicals are not unified and the Peronists have a motto: they vote together in the elections, then quickly split after the vote and the squabbles begin again. The country goes through a continuous cycle of strong but unpopular military governments giving way to weak, chaotic civilian governments. It has been that way in Argentina since the 1930s and it is not easy to be optimistic that things will be any better this time. Videla is the choice of most of the moderate elements. The fact that he does not seem to have a very broad popular following is because people find it distasteful to openly demonstrate their support for military rule, despite its acknowledged necessity. They also want to see first what will happen next. Videla himself is forced to bow to political convenience and sometimes he seems to say things that he will later contradict.

Asked about Mauricio Lopez, the Argentine professor and ecumenical leader who was abducted from his home in Mendoza on January 1, Gattinoni said he believes that Lopez is alive and in or near Buenos Aires. Lopez has absolutely no terrorist connections and there has been considerable foreign pressure on his behalf. It is possible that the forces that have Lopez are unwilling to release him in order not to be embarrassed or be seen as capitulating to foreign pressure. For this reason, church groups are trying not to push the Lopez case too far to try to avoid antagonizing his abductors into any rash action that may cost him his life.

On Claudia Peiro, the daughter of a Disciple of Christ missionary arrested in 1976, Gattinoni explained that she was arrested for writing notes on behalf of her boyfriend, a terrorist. She is in Villa Devoto prison now and can receive visits from her family. Mr. Rondon offered to speak with a member of the Disciples of Christ Church in Argentina to reiterate the US government's concern in her case.

Gattinoni said that the Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights is preparing to present a class action appeal to the Argentine Supreme Court requesting the release of a number of Argentines detained without charge under state of siege. The appeal will highlight cases of 12 persons who will be shown to be absolutely innocent of any possible wrongdoing and will list another 500 names of persons believed to be improperly detained by authorities. The appeal will be written in such a way that the Supreme Court will have to respond or be humiliated in the public opinion.

POL:YThayer:jr

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